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## Navigating Your Teenage Daughter Through The Gossip Wars

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One researcher calls it "the slut trap." Another describes it as a pedestal waiting to be smashed. A third calls it the "thinnest of all tightropes."

What they're talking about is your daughter's reputation, and it can start in middle school, not high school. It's typically girls, not boys, who start nasty rumors and a girl can get a bad reputation without any basis in fact, although some girls who do engage in sexual behavior gain positive, if temporary, status. If this sounds scary and confusing to you, imagine how your middle-school daughter feels.

"All the girls are afraid this could happen to them," says Lyn Mikel Brown, a developmental psychologist at Colby College who specializes in girls' development.

The way she and other researchers see it, girls are caught in a bind.

On one hand, there's external pressure from the time they are little telling them that in order to be popular, they need to please boys and get male attention. At the same time, starting in fourth or fifth grade and peaking in seventh and eighth, they feel a strong need to belong. These two forces coming together is what clinical psychologist Sharon Maxwell of Canton calls "girls' sexual energy": the realization that being a sexual person gives you social power and that looking a certain way - that is, sexy - helps you to fit in.

This doesn't necessarily translate to wanting sex or even feeling sexual. "It's more a need to feel personally powerful," says Maxwell, whose specialty is teen sexuality. She has written a sex health curriculum and speaks to teen groups in area high schools.

There's no magic moment when this happens, although it tends to happen later for girls who get attention through achievement, earlier for those who don't have an arena in which they excel. The good news for parents is that just because a girl looks sexy, she may not be sexually active.

"What you know for sure is that she's trying on different personas. She's experimenting," says Maxwell.

[Time out for a brief word about boys. They're also feeling some of the same pressures as girls, although the external messages they get are very different. Anecdotal evidence suggests they don't get reputations in the same way girls do, says psychologist Deborah Tolman, associate director at the Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College. If they do get a reputation, it's more likely to happen in high school.

Maxwell puts it this way: "In terms of confronting their sexuality, girls have moved into the 21st century, boys are still stuck in the 1950s." Look for a fuller discussion on sexuality issues

involving boys in an upcoming column.]

If a girl is the first in her group to gain some sexual knowledge - and it doesn't have to be first-hand, it could be learned from a magazine or an older sister - other girls typically see her as cool, a trend-setter. "There's prestige in it," says clinical psychologist Roni Cohen-Sandler of Weston, Conn. She is author of "Trust me, mom, everyone else is going, The New Rules for Mothering Adolescent Girls" (Penguin). That status can turn on a dime.

"One day, you can be the girl who is doing oral sex and boys and girls know it and you're popular and cool, and the next day you're a slut because somebody decided you were becoming too popular," says Maxwell. Here's where the tightrope comes in: A girl can just as easily get that label because she got the best grade in math or wore overalls to a party where everyone else wore tank tops.

"Everything you do gets scrutinized and labeled," says Cohen-Sandler. "Girls are so quick to judge because they are worried about how they will be judged."

Parents need to pick their way through this morass carefully.

For one thing, you may only barely know what's going on. If a girl is being called a slut, she's usually too ashamed to tell her parents, even if it's not true. More likely, you'll notice a change in behavior or moods, or sense that her friends suddenly aren't around. Although negative attention can disappear as quickly as it surfaced, once she's a victim, a girl really suffers emotionally, says Tolman. She is author of "Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality" (Harvard University Press).

Even if you hear rumors, don't rush to judgment, she says. Accusing, shaming, or punishing your daughter won't help. Instead, Cohen-Sandler says a good starting point for a conversation might be to say, "I've noticed some changes. You seem down. Sarah and Lily haven't been calling. I know girls this age can be mean to each other and jealous. Has something like that been happening to you?"

Some girls will readily admit to having oral sex because they don't see it as a big deal, or they'll say, "I'm in love." Maxwell says the best answer to that is, "Tell me how you know." She says young teenagers often confuse love with need because it makes them feel special to be appealed to by a boy. Perhaps most important, this is a time to talk about what it means to be a sexual person.

Girls who are best able to navigate these difficult waters have parents who have been talking with them for years about sexuality. "I started with my daughter when she was 4 and 5," says Brown.

Early on, the idea is to build a common vocabulary about how girls and women are represented in the media, and to affirm friendships. "If you're watching a cartoon and a girl abandons her friend, I might point out that it takes more strength to stick up for a friend than to sell her out," Brown says, a value that may come in handy when she, or a friend, is the victim of talk.

At 8 or 9 or whenever there's a hint of interest in boys, it's time to convey your values about sexuality and the choices that people have as sexual beings, says Tolman. She would explain, for instance, that girls can get labeled as "good" or "bad" not only for what they accomplish, but also because of the way they look and dress and behave. The good news, she would continue, is that girls have more control over this than they may realize because they have the power to make choices.

Girls like knowing that, says Maxwell: "If you tell her what clothes she can or can't wear, she may not listen. But if you let her know she can choose the kind of message she wants to send, she may decide, 'OK, I don't want to wear a belly shirt in math class.'" Her bottom line is to tell a girl, "You are in control of your power. You get to pick and choose when to use it." Tolman sees this as a basic tool every girl needs to negotiate the middle school years.

There's one other thing that helps: A girl's ability to let talk roll off her back.

"Girls who are the healthiest refuse to let it bother them when they know rumors aren't true," says Tolman. And what if they are true? Cohen-Sandler says that isn't as hard as you might think: "When a girl changes her behavior and starts to respect herself more, people begin to see her differently."

Afterthought: Other books that may be helpful: "The Secret Life of Girls" (Free Press) by Sharon Lamb; "Raising a daughter, Parents and the Awakening of a Healthy Woman, revised edition" (Celestial Arts) by Jeanne Elium & Don Elium; "Queen Bees & Wannabes, Helping your daughter survive cliques, gossip, boyfriends, and other realities of adolescence" (Three Rivers Press) by Rosalind Wiseman; "Saving Beauty from the Beast, How to protect your daughter from an unhealthy relationship" (Little, Brown) by Vicki Crompton and Ellen Zelda Kessner (Little, Brown).

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#### TRY BANISHING JUDGMENT, EDICTS:

1. FATHERS OFTEN ARE THE BEST ONES TO TALK WITH DAUGHTERS ABOUT SEXUAL BEHAVIOR BECAUSE THEY CAN SAY, "I REMEMBER WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO BE A 14-YEAR-OLD BOY." DON'T BE PUT OFF IF SHE ROLLS HER EYES OR SAYS YOU'RE DISGUSTING. IT DOESN'T MEAN SHE ISN'T LISTENING.

2. YOU'RE MORE LIKELY TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN CONVEYING YOUR VALUES ABOUT SEXUAL BEHAVIOR IF YOU LISTEN TO YOUR DAUGHTER WITHOUT JUDGING HER RATHER THAN SETTING DOWN EDICTS. FOR INSTANCE, ASK, "WHAT DO GIRLS YOUR AGE THINK ABOUT KISSING?" RATHER THAN, "YOU'RE TOO YOUNG TO KISS."

3. GIRLS WHO DON'T CONNECT SEXUAL BEHAVIOR TO THEIR OWN FEELINGS ARE MORE VULNERABLE TO AGREEING TO MEET SOMEONE'S NEEDS AND THEN FEELING BAD AFTERWARD.

4. WHEN SHE DRESSES PROVOCATIVELY, TRY ASKING HER, "WHY ARE YOU WEARING THAT?" RATHER THAN SAYING, "YOU CAN'T WEAR THAT." THEN LET HER KNOW THE MESSAGE THE CLOTHES SEND AND ASK, "IS THAT WHAT YOU MEANT TO DO?"

5. ONE OF THE MOST COMMON WAYS RUMORS GET STARTED IS VIA INSTANT MESSAGING BECAUSE TEENAGERS FEEL ANONYMOUS. ALSO, AT [WWW.LIVE-JOURNAL.COM](http://WWW.LIVE-JOURNAL.COM), GIRLS WRITE AS IF IN A DIARY, THEN POST THE WRITINGS UNDER CODED NAMES TO WHICH FRIENDS HAVE ACCESS.

6. PSYCHOLOGIST SHARON MAXWELL SAYS GIRLS AND BOYS ALIKE ARE THIRSTY FOR A CONVERSATION THAT REMINDS THEM TO BE TRUE TO THEIR INNER VALUES. SHE DOES THIS BY ASKING A TEEN TO THINK OF HER/HIMSELF AS A FIVE-POINTED STAR WITH EACH POINT REPRESENTING THE FIVE THINGS IN LIFE THAT ARE CHANGING: HER BODY, HER FEELINGS, RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILY, RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEERS, THE WAY SHE PROCESSES THE WORLD. IN THE CENTER IS WHAT NEVER CHANGES: HER INNER SELF. TELL HER TO LOOK AT HERSELF IN THE MIRROR EACH NIGHT AND ASK, "WHAT KIND OF PERSON WAS I TODAY? HAVE I BEEN TRUE TO MYSELF?"

7. SOME MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOLS ARE WORKING WITH STUDENTS TO DEVELOP A SEXUAL CODE OF ETHICS THAT INCLUDES A CODE OF DRESS AS WELL AS PROHIBITIONS ON PHYSICAL TOUCHING IN THE HALLS; GRINDING AND SANDWICHES AT DANCES (WHERE TWO BOYS DANCE PROVOCATIVELY WITH A GIRL BETWEEN THEM); AND RUMOR SPREADING.